

The Shawhan Bardstown, KY Distillery

A Shawhan descendant had found a California Thrifty Drug Store, in the 1970s, that was selling a whiskey brand called “Old Miner”, that came from the Shawhan Distillery of Bardstown, KY (refer to label on following page).

In our research, we were able to contact Sam K. Cecil, of Bardstown, KY. Sam is a retired distiller who has spent all of his eighty-odd years in Nelson County, other than when he was in the Army for five years during WWII. In particular, he has worked with distilleries in the Bardstown area. Much of what follows is based on what this good Kentucky gentleman shared with us:

George Henry Shawhan sold his Weston, MO distillery and Shawhan brand name, absent the Shawhan family formula, to the Singer family in about 1908. In some manner, the Shawhan name was eventually sold to Tom Pendergast, a member of the Kansas City Pendergast political machine — the same political organization that was so helpful in the career of Harry S. Truman.

The advent of Prohibition in the 1920s put a stop to all such distillery operations, except for a very few who were permitted to operate and distill for medicinal purposes. At Prohibition’s end, in the early 1930s, a group of local Bardstown, KY investors started the Independent Distillery in Bardstown, on the site of the old Sam P. Lancaster Distillery. They were unable to finance it properly, and, in 1936, they sold out to Tom Pendergast who changed its name to “Shawhan Distillery”. The plant was subsequently acquired by Joe Makler of Chicago; he continued to operate the facility in agreement with Waterfill & Frazier Distillery, one of the larger distilleries in Kentucky. Waterfill and Frazier made private brands, such as Thrifty Drug Store’s “Old Miner”, for shipment to McKesson Robins Liquors in Kansas City — McKesson Robins was a whiskey supplier for Thrifty Drugs. Makler, together with Waterfill and Frazier, was in this business until about 1974, when they transferred the Shawhan Distillery label to Barton Distillery, another Bardstown company — Barton also operated under the trade name of County Line Distillery. At the same time, Makler sold the distillery plant location (private brand, the Shawhan Distillery) in Bardstown to the James B. Beam whiskey people, a subsidiary of American Brands — American Brands has since become Fortune Brands. Beam tore down the distillery plant, but has retained the large warehouse. Barton Distillery continued to supply McKesson and Robins with the Shawhan Distillery private brand label of “Old Miner” for some years after 1974; it was “bottled in bond” — i.e. it was aged a minimum of four years and no more than eight years and was 100 proof. **Note:** Sam Cecil obtained some of this data from a friend of his, the former bottling superintendent of Barton Distillery.

Note: In 1998, the Jim Beam warehouse location is still located and is utilized in Bardstown, KY.

THE BOURBON INDUSTRY IN 1998

To be official, bourbon must meet certain legal requirements:

- Must be made in the United States.
- Must contain at least 51 percent corn
- Must be aged in new, charred, American white oak casks for a minimum of two years.
- Must not contain any coloring other than that which it takes from the charred casks.

Where is bourbon now distilled?

Bourbon is principally distilled in the Kentucky counties of Jefferson, Franklin, Nelson, and Anderson – it is no longer distilled in Bourbon County.

What is the typical bourbon-making process?

1. The grain is mixed and ground.
2. The grain, water, and fermenting agents such as yeast are placed in wooden fermenting tanks, often cypress wood, for 3-4 days.
3. The fermented spirits are run through the distillation process, either on a single run or a double run; it usually takes about five days from the grinding of the grains until they are ready to be barrelled.
4. The distilled spirits, water-white in color, are poured into new, white oak barrels for aging.
5. The barrels are placed in multi-story warehouses for aging, a minimum of two years – usually 4-8 years. The warehouses are usually rectangular, quite large, and on a higher elevation to take advantage of the best climatic conditions; a neat row of small windows normally sets apart each story. Each story is divided into “ricks” holding a row of barrels.
6. In some warehouses the barrels are rotated around between heights, etc. to assure that the barrels are evenly balanced as to taste, color, etc.